Chapter 41 Books

むREEK
わっ…
…SO I'M USING THE LEFTOVER ROSES FROM YOUR BLUE ROSE PROJECT…
…TO BREW PERFUME OILS.
WE FOUND A DISTILLATION APPARATUS WHILE CLEANING…
WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
WOULDN'T YOU LIKE TO KNOW?
COOLING WATER
STEAM
HEAT
FLOATING ATOP THE EXPELLED WATER IS THE PERFUME OIL.
THE RESULTING LIQUID COMES OUT HERE.
…WHILE THE STEAM IS COOLED BY THE WATER IN THE UPPER POT.
WE BOIL THE FLOWER PETALS IN THE LOWER POT…
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IS THE POT BACK THERE DOING THE SAME?
THAT ONE IS FOR MAKING DISTILLED ALCOHOL.
BY REPEATEDLY DISTILLING LIQUOR...
...YOU CAN MAKE HIGHLY CONCEN-TRATED ALCOHOL THAT CAN BE USED FOR DISINFECTION AND STERI-LIZATION.
IT'S QUITE STRONG, THE SMELL.
TRUE, BUT WILD ROSES WOULD BE EVEN MORE PUNGENT.
I WAS THINKING WE COULD USE IT TO KEEP THE JADE PALACE CLEAN, SINCE THE PRINCESS RESIDES THERE.
YOU CAN DO SUCH A THING?
YES, IT'S DONE IN THE WEST.
ARE YOU DOING THIS HERE BECAUSE IT WOULD BE MORE DIFFICULT TO DO IN THE JADE PALACE?
GLANCE
THAT'S PART OF IT.

WHAT ABOUT THE PERFUMES USED HERE AT THE INNER COURT?
SO LONG AS THEY'RE NOT HIGHLY CONCENTRATED, THEY SHOULDN'T POSE A THREAT.
I THINK THEY TOO SHOULD BE SAFE.
BUT SOME PERFUME OILS CAN INDUCE MISCARRIAGE IN PREGNANT WOMEN.
WHISPER
ひそっ
I'M GLAD THE QUACK WENT TO GET MOON-CAKES.
HE'S A GOOD PERSON, BUT HE HAS A LOOSE TONGUE.
IT'S STILL TOO SOON FOR HIM TO LEARN OF CONSORT GYOKUYO'S PREG-NANCY.
SO WHAT IS IT THIS TIME?
TO WHAT DO WE OWE THE PLEASURE OF YOUR VISIT?

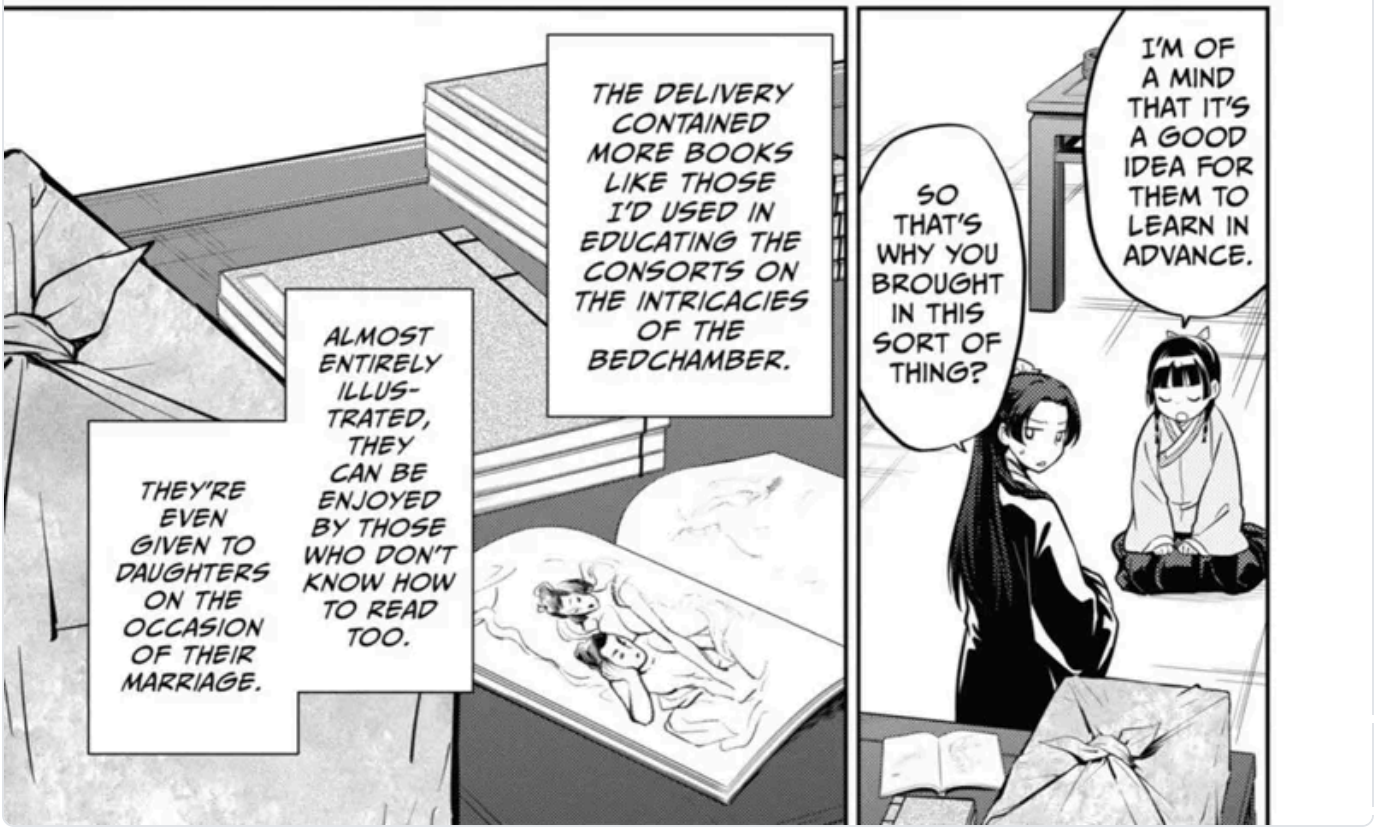
WHO WOULDN'T BE CURIOUS ABOUT WHAT WAS GOING ON IN HERE GIVEN THE STENCH YOU'RE MAKING?
PUFF
プー
GAO SHUN'S FACE...
...SAYS "CAN'T YOU BE MORE DIGNIFIED?" ALL OVER IT.
.....
POUT
プイ
POUT
プイ
!!
FWUMP
ズーン

OH NO!
DELIVERY FOR YOU, LI'L LADYYY!
CLATTER
AND HERE I WENT TO THE TROUBLE OF GETTING THESE DELIVERED TO THE PHYSICIAN SO HONGNIANG WOULDN'T FIND OUT!
BOW

WHAT IS ALL THIS?
SIR JINSHI!
TH—
THIS IS JUST A LITTLE SOME-THING FROM HOME!
IT'S NOTHING OF INTEREST, I SWEAR!
HOH!
FROM YOUR HOME, YOU SAY?
WHY DOES HE SEEM PARTICULARLY THRILLED?!
IT, UH...
IT'S, UMM, GOT MY UNDER-THINGS INSIDE.

OKAY, NOW JUST WALK AWAY!
...O-OH.
...REQUIRE TWO GROWN MEN TO CARRY THEM?
BUT WHAT UNDER-THINGS...
OH!

ERM!
SO I BELIEVE...
...THAT THE INNER COURT'S OBSESSION WITH MORAL PURITY POSES A PROBLEM.
THE MAJORITY OF COURT LADIES HERE ARE VIRGINS.
IF BY SOME CHANCE THEY WIN THE FAVOR OF THE EMPEROR...
...THEY'RE ALREADY GOING TO FEEL INTIMIDATED. SHOULD THEY COMMIT ANY BLUNDERS ON TOP OF THAT...
WELL, I'D FEEL SORRY FOR THEM.


I'M OF A MIND THAT IT'S A GOOD IDEA FOR THEM TO LEARN IN ADVANCE.
SO THAT'S WHY YOU BROUGHT IN THIS SORT OF THING?
THE DELIVERY CONTAINED MORE BOOKS LIKE THOSE I'D USED IN EDUCATING THE CONSORTS ON THE INTRICACIES OF THE BEDCHAMBER.
ALMOST ENTIRELY ILLUS-TRATED, THEY CAN BE ENJOYED BY THOSE WHO DON'T KNOW HOW TO READ TOO.
THEY'RE EVEN GIVEN TO DAUGHTERS ON THE OCCASION OF THEIR MARRIAGE.

HERE AT THE INNER COURT, CONSORT LIHUA IS A BIG FAN OF THEM.
I'VE ALSO BEEN GETTING THEM IN LATELY FOR THE EMPEROR AS A SOURCE OF COMFORT.
HE'S BEEN HOLDING OFF ON HIS NIGHTLY JAUNTS TO THE JADE PALACE, AFTER ALL.
I'M BY NO MEANS GREEDY.
I SIMPLY HAVE TO TRY TO MAKE SOME MONEY ON THE SIDE...
...SO PA DOESN'T GO HUNGRY BACK IN THE PLEASURE DISTRICT.
WITH THIS TYPE OF BOOK, THE HIGHER THE PRICE, THE BIGGER THE PROFITS.
IN THE HOPES OF FINDING MORE TAKERS FOR THIS MATERIAL, I ORDERED IN BULK THIS TIME...
...SO THIS IS AN UNFOR-TUNATE TURN OF EVENTS.
STARE
NOW THIS IS AN UNUSUAL SIGHT.
HOW SEDATE CAN HE BE IF HE'S EATING UP THAT BOOK?

ARE THEY PRINTED WITH WOOD BLOCKS...?
OH, THAT'S ALL HE'S FIXATING ON?
LOOK.
THESE ARE RATHER WELL-MADE.
AND THEY USE HIGH-QUALITY PAPER TOO.
I HEAR THEY'RE ACTUALLY PRINTED USING TECHNOLOGY FROM THE WEST THAT EMPLOYS METAL PLATES INSTEAD OF WOODEN BLOCKS.
THAT IS IMPRESSIVE.
INDEED!!
I FEEL IT WOULD BE A WASTE FOR SUCH A FINE PRODUCT TO NOT BE ENJOYED WIDELY. WOULDN'T YOU AGREE?
BONK
THAT'S BESIDE THE POINT.

.....
OW, OW...
IF YOU'RE INTERESTED, PERHAPS YOU SHOULD ASK FOR A COPY?
!
UH, NO!
I AM ABSO-LUTELY NOT INTER-ESTED!
!! STARE
I'M NOT, GOT IT?!
AHEM!
ANY-WAY!
I SHALL OVERLOOK THIS TRANS-GRESSION JUST THIS ONCE.

WILL YOU REALLY?!
HO BEAM
あ
...I WANT YOU TO TELL ME WHERE THESE BOOKS ARE MADE.
AND...
ACK!

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK!
I JUST WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THEIR PRINTING TECHNOL-OGY!
OH HUH...
VERY WELL, SIR.
YOU WISH TO KNOW THE NAME OF THE VENDOR, YES?

A MAN OF JINSHI'S CALIBER COULD HAVE THE REAL THING IN NO SMALL QUANTITY AS OFTEN AS HE WANTS.
SWISH
さら
さら
SWISH
BUT I SUPPOSE SOME PEOPLE PREFER IT ON PAPER.

I FEAR PARTS OF THESE BOOKS MAY NEED TO BE CENSORED.
...IN OTHER WORDS, THEY'RE TOO EXPLICIT.
XIAO-MAO.
YOU GOTTA BELIEVE MEEEE!
YES?
I HAVE TO DIS-AGREE.
BUT THE EMPEROR HIMSELF SAYS THAT WHAT I'VE PROVIDED THUS FAR ISN'T SUFFICIENT.
I HAD THE CRAFTY OLD MADAM PICK THOSE OUT FOR ME ESPECIALLY TOO...
AWW...
CONFISCATED
TEN DAYS LATER

OHH...
WHAT IS IT I SEEK...
...BENEATH THE BEAUTIFUL BLOSSOMS ...?!
HEY, CAN YOU GUESS WHAT'S BURIED BELOW THEM?
NOM もぐ
HORSE MANURE ...?
BFFT!
EASY, NOW. BEST NOT WOLF YOUR FOOD DOWN.
UUUGH!
THAT WAS ENTIRELY YOUR FAULT!
PLANTS REQUIRE NOT ONLY WATER BUT ALSO SUITABLE FERTILIZER TO GROW...
...SO I DON'T THINK I SAID ANYTHING WRONG.

I DIDN'T KNOW YOU COULD READ.
I COULD'VE SWORN SHE CAME FROM A SMALL VILLAGE.
?
THE NOVEL I WAS QUOTING FROM IS A HUGE DEAL RIGHT NOW!
SHEESH, YOU'RE JUST MAKING FUN!
I CAN'T!
BUT A GIRL WHO CAN HAS BEEN READING IT OUT LOUD TO EVERYONE!
I CAN'T WAIT TO HEAR WHAT HAPPENS NEXT!
IF EVEN THE ILLITERATE MAIDS ARE HOOKED...
...IT MUST BE QUITE POPULAR INDEED...

I NEED THE NEXT INSTALL-MENT NOW!
IS THAT IT?!
POOH!

WOULD YOU LIKE TO READ THIS TOO?
HIS MAJESTY GAVE THESE TO ALL OF HIS CONCU-BINES.
WE WERE TOLD WE COULD SHARE THEM AROUND ONCE WE WERE DONE READING.

SIR GAO SHUN TOLD ME THEY'RE PRINTING NEW BOOKS AGAIN.
HE SAID HE'LL PASS THEM ALONG WHEN THEY'RE READY.
OH, WEL-COME BACK, MAO-MAO.

NOVELS ARE CONSIDERED LOW-CLASS TO THE UPPER ECHELONS OF SOCIETY.
...ARE SOMEHOW INFERIOR TO HIS-TORICAL FACT.
THAT'S DOWN TO THE COMMON PERCEP-TION THAT FICTIONAL WORKS...
IT'S SURPRISINGLY GOOD FOR A NOVEL.

I MUST KNOW WHAT HAPPENS NEEEEXT!
BUT IT SEEMS SUCH CREATIVE WORKS ARE MORE THAN THRILLING ENOUGH FOR THE RESIDENTS OF THE INNER COURT.
THIS SEAL BELONGS TO THE BOOKSTORE I TOLD JINSHI ABOUT THE OTHER DAY.
THIS SCENE ...
IT'S THE ONE XIAOLAN WAS QUOTING FROM.
HM?
I HAD A FEELING HIS INTEREST HAD SOMETHING TO DO WITH POLITICS.
I WAS RIGHT TO THINK HE WAS UP TO SOME-THING AGAIN.
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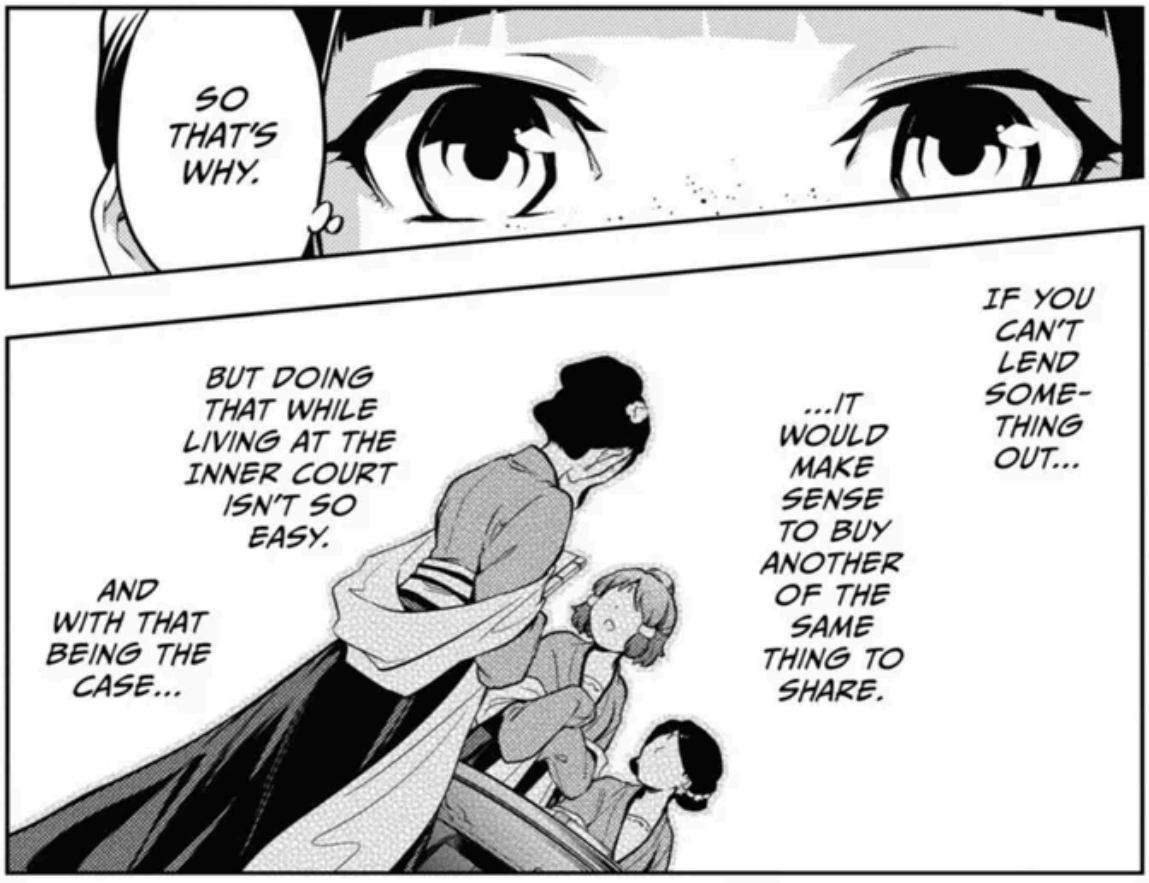
AND WITH THE PLATES TO PRINT THE MATERIAL ALREADY IN HAND, ONE COULD MASS PRODUCE AN EDITION FOR COMMON FOLK SIMPLY BY USING CHEAPER PAPER.
THE PROFITS WOULD BE INCALCULABLE.
I SHOULD'VE CHARGED THE BOOK-STORE A FINDER'S FEE.
FICTION THOUGH IT MAY BE, BOOKS OF THIS QUALITY ARE WORTHY OF BEING A GIFT FROM THE EMPEROR.
AND IF A SET WAS GIVEN TO EVERY CONCUBINE, THEY WOULD HAVE NEEDED TO PRINT AT LEAST A HUNDRED COPIES OF EACH VOLUME.

BUT WHY?
WHY MAKE AN EFFORT TO DISPERSE "VULGAR" NOVELS...
...AMONG THE CONCUBINES, WHO ARE ALL WOMEN OF GOOD BREEDING?
BUT IT'S SUCH A SHAME!
EVEN THOUGH CONSORT GYOKUYO GAVE US LEAVE TO SHARE...
...WE'LL BE THE ONLY ONES TO READ THESE SINCE THERE'S NO ONE ELSE HERE.
WE JUST DON'T HAVE THAT MANY PEOPLE AT THE JADE PALACE.

OH!
GOOD POINT!
WE WOULDN'T WANT THEM TO GO MISSING OR ANY-THING!
SHE'S RIGHT!
THESE WERE GIFTS, SO WE NEED TO TREAT THEM WITH CARE.
I TOLD YOU, WE CAN'T GO SHARING WITH GIRLS OUTSIDE OF OUR PALACE.


SO THAT'S WHY.
IF YOU CAN'T LEND SOME-THING OUT...
...IT WOULD MAKE SENSE TO BUY ANOTHER OF THE SAME THING TO SHARE.
BUT DOING THAT WHILE LIVING AT THE INNER COURT ISN'T SO EASY.
AND WITH THAT BEING THE CASE...

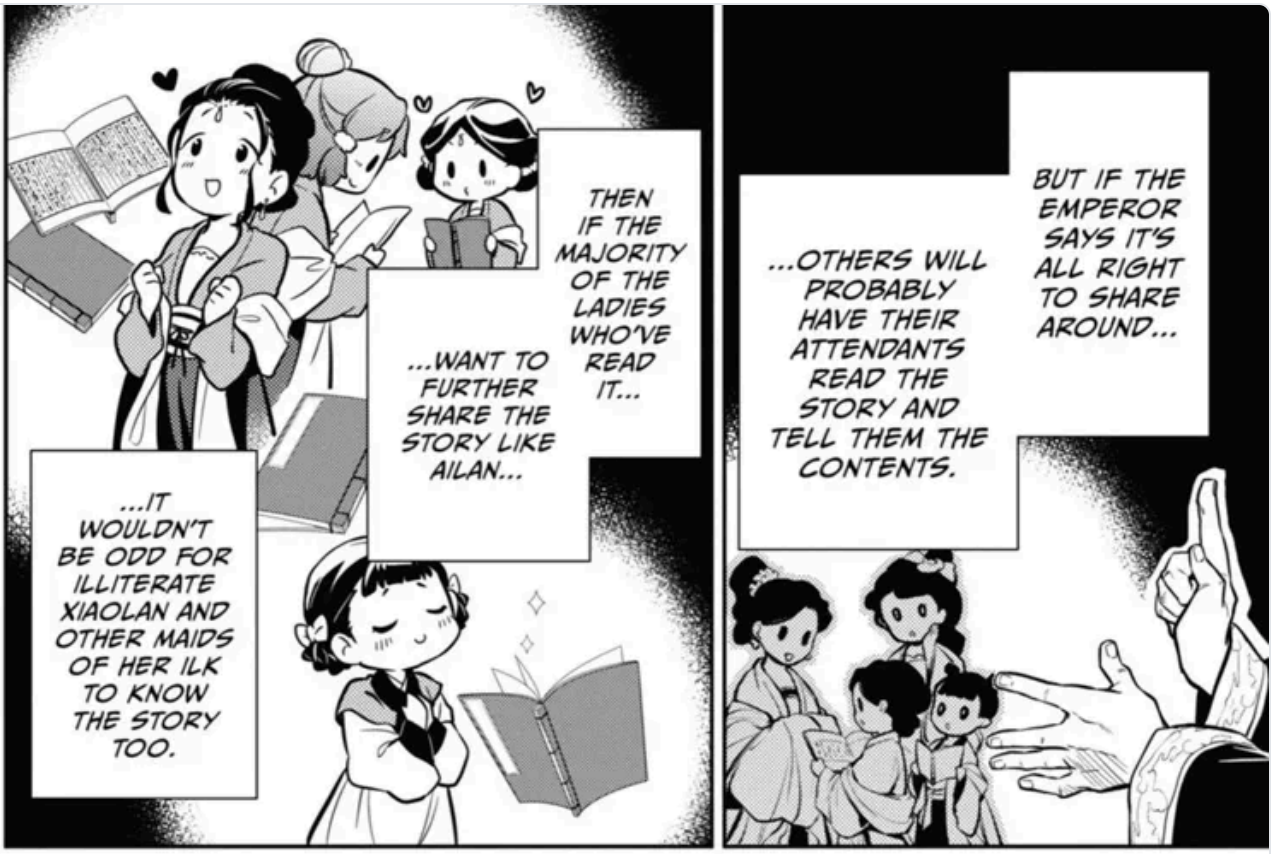
HUH?!
...INSTEAD OF LENDING OUT THE BOOKS THEM-SELVES?
COULDN'T YOU COPY THE TEXT AND SHARE THAT...

SO I DON'T THINK COPYING IT WOULD BE TOO DIFFICULT FOR YOU.
...BUT YOU HAVE LOVELY HAND-WRITING, LADY AILAN.
THE ILLUSTRA-TIONS AND SUCH MIGHT POSE A PROBLEM ...

HUSH, NOW!
YING-HUA!
UUUGH, ARE YOU REALLY GONNA DO ALL THAT? SOUNDS LIKE A PAIN IN THE BACKSIDE TO ME.

I...I SUPPOSE.

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, IT'S A REALLY ROUNDABOUT APPROACH TO TAKE.
THE LADIES WHO SERVE AT COURT NOTWITHSTANDING...
...THE MAJORITY OF THE MAIDS AT THE INNER COURT ARE ILLITERATE.
A GIFT FROM HIS IMPERIAL MAJESTY.
ONE WOULD NORMALLY TREASURE SUCH A THING.
BUT ALL HIS CONCUBINES WERE PRESENTED WITH THE SAME, AND IT'S A POPULAR NOVEL, AT THAT.
THAT SEEMS TO BE A POINT OF CONCERN FOR THE OFFICIALS.
WHEN I WAS WORKING AS JINSHI'S MAID...
...I CAME ACROSS DOCUMENTS IN HIS OFFICE PERTAINING TO THE LITERACY RATE AMONG THE COURT LADIES.
I'M SURE SOME INSOLENT CONCUBINES...
...WON'T EVEN DEIGN TO TOUCH SUCH A FREELY GIVEN PRESENT.


THEN IF THE MAJORITY OF THE LADIES WHO'VE READ IT...
...WANT TO FURTHER SHARE THE STORY LIKE AILAN...
...IT WOULDN'T BE ODD FOR ILLITERATE XIAOLAN AND OTHER MAIDS OF HER ILK TO KNOW THE STORY TOO.
BUT IF THE EMPEROR SAYS IT'S ALL RIGHT TO SHARE AROUND...
...OTHERS WILL PROBABLY HAVE THEIR ATTENDANTS READ THE STORY AND TELL THEM THE CONTENTS.

LOOK!
EEEEEEk!
ONCE, LONG AGO, I CAUGHT A RARE SNAKE AND RAN AROUND SHOWING IT OFF TO EVERY-ONE.
...WHEN YOU FIND SOME-THING THAT SPARKS YOUR INTEREST.
I UNDER-STAND HOW IT FEELS TO WANT TO SHARE...

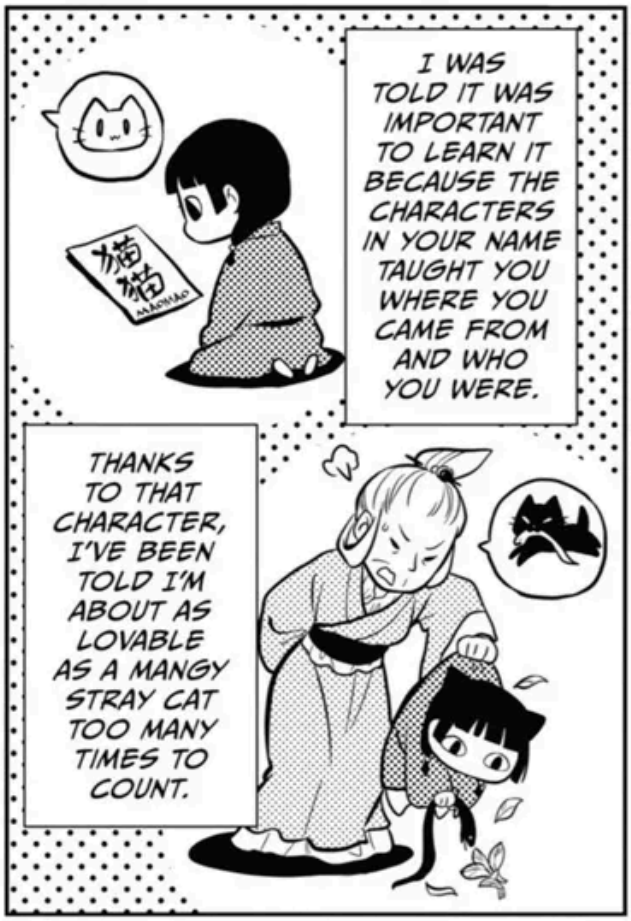
...CAN ONLY MEAN THAT THERE ARE NOW SURE TO BE SOME WOMEN WHO WILL TRY TO LEARN HOW TO READ.
WELL ...
...BOOKS OF ANY KIND BEING CIRCULATED AROUND THE INNER COURT...

AND SO...
...THE SCHEME PUT INTO MOTION BY JINSHI AND GAO SHUN APPEARED TO BE GOING QUITE SWIM-MINGLY.
HEY, MAO-MAO!
TEACH ME TO READ!
WHY ARE YOU ASKING ME NOW?
PAFF
ぽすん
THE GIRL WHO WAS READING THAT NOVEL TO US... SHE'S LOST HER VOICE.
SHE'S WORKING HARD TO COPY IT DOWN INSTEAD...
...BUT I WON'T BE ABLE TO READ IT.

NO!
SHALL I READ THE BOOK TO YOU INSTEAD?
WHAT A KIND GESTURE. PAPER ISN'T EXACTLY CHEAP.
I KNOW I SUGGESTED AS MUCH TO AILAN, BUT I'M SHOCKED TO HEAR THERE ARE LADIES ACTUALLY DOING IT.

...WHEN SHE'S TAKING THE TIME TO WRITE THE WHOLE THING OUT.
THAT WOULD BE CHEATING ON MY PART...

HEY! WHAT'S WITH YOU ALL OF A SUDDEN ...?!
WHAT AN ADMI-RABLE SENTI-MENT...
RUFFLE RUFFLE


I WAS TOLD IT WAS IMPORTANT TO LEARN IT BECAUSE THE CHARACTERS IN YOUR NAME TAUGHT YOU WHERE YOU CAME FROM AND WHO YOU WERE.
THANKS TO THAT CHARACTER, I'VE BEEN TOLD I'M ABOUT AS LOVABLE AS A MANGY STRAY CAT TOO MANY TIMES TO COUNT.

THE FIRST CHARACTER I LEARNED WAS THAT FOR "CAT," THE ONE IN MY GIVEN NAME.

GNNNRGH...
THIS SAYS "XIAOLAN." NOW YOU TRY COPYING IT.
XIAOLAN
小蘭
OKAY!
FRANKLY, I HAVE NO CLUE IF THESE ARE THE ACTUAL CHARACTERS FOR HER NAME OR NOT. IT'S JUST THE MOST COMMON WAY OF WRITING IT...
SLOPPY
MY NAME IS ACTUALLY PRETTY DIFFICULT TO WRITE, HUH?
URGH...
YOU CAN LEARN TO READ BY LEARNING TO WRITE...
...BUT WOULD YOU PREFER TO LEARN JUST READING INSTEAD?
NO.
IF I'M GOING TO LEARN, I WANT TO LEARN HOW TO WRITE TOO.

HERE AT THE INNER COURT TOO, WELL-PAID JOBS FIND THEIR WAY TO THOSE WHO CAN READ AND WRITE.
FROM WHAT I HEAR, THE PARTICULARLY ACCOMPLISHED LADIES IN THESE ROLES ARE EVEN OCCASIONALLY TRANSFERRED TO ADMINISTRATIVE POSTS OUTSIDE OF THE INNER COURT.
KNOWING HOW TO WRITE SHOULD HELP WITH THAT, RIGHT?
I'LL HAVE TO FIND A JOB ON MY OWN WHEN I LEAVE THE INNER COURT.
LET ME GIVE IT ANOTHER GO!
LOOKS LIKE SHE'S THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE IN HER OWN FASHION.
XIAOLAN CAME HERE AROUND THE SAME TIME I ORIGINALLY DID...
...AND SHE'S MORE THAN HALFWAY THROUGH HER TWO-YEAR TERM OF SERVICE AS A MAID.
HER FAMILY SOLD HER OFF FOR MONEY...
...SO I DOUBT SHE'LL BE ABLE TO GO BACK HOME AFTER THAT.

SURE, THANKS!
RIGHT, THEN! WHAT DO YOU SAY WE TAKE THINGS UP A NOTCH ?!
THORN APPLE
KUDZU ROOT
CATER-PILLAR FUNGUS.
UMM, HOW DO YOU READ THIS ONE?
KUDZU ROOT.
AND THAT ONE?
THORN APPLE.
AND THAT ONE?
CATER-PILLAR FUNGUS
I DECIDED TO START OVER BY TEACHING HER HOW TO WRITE GREETINGS.
.....
.....HEY. WOULD YOU CALL THESE COMMON WORDS?